HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

SANDKINGS

Graphic Adaptation by Doug Moench, Pat Broderick, and Neal McPheeters

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DC

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SANDKINGS

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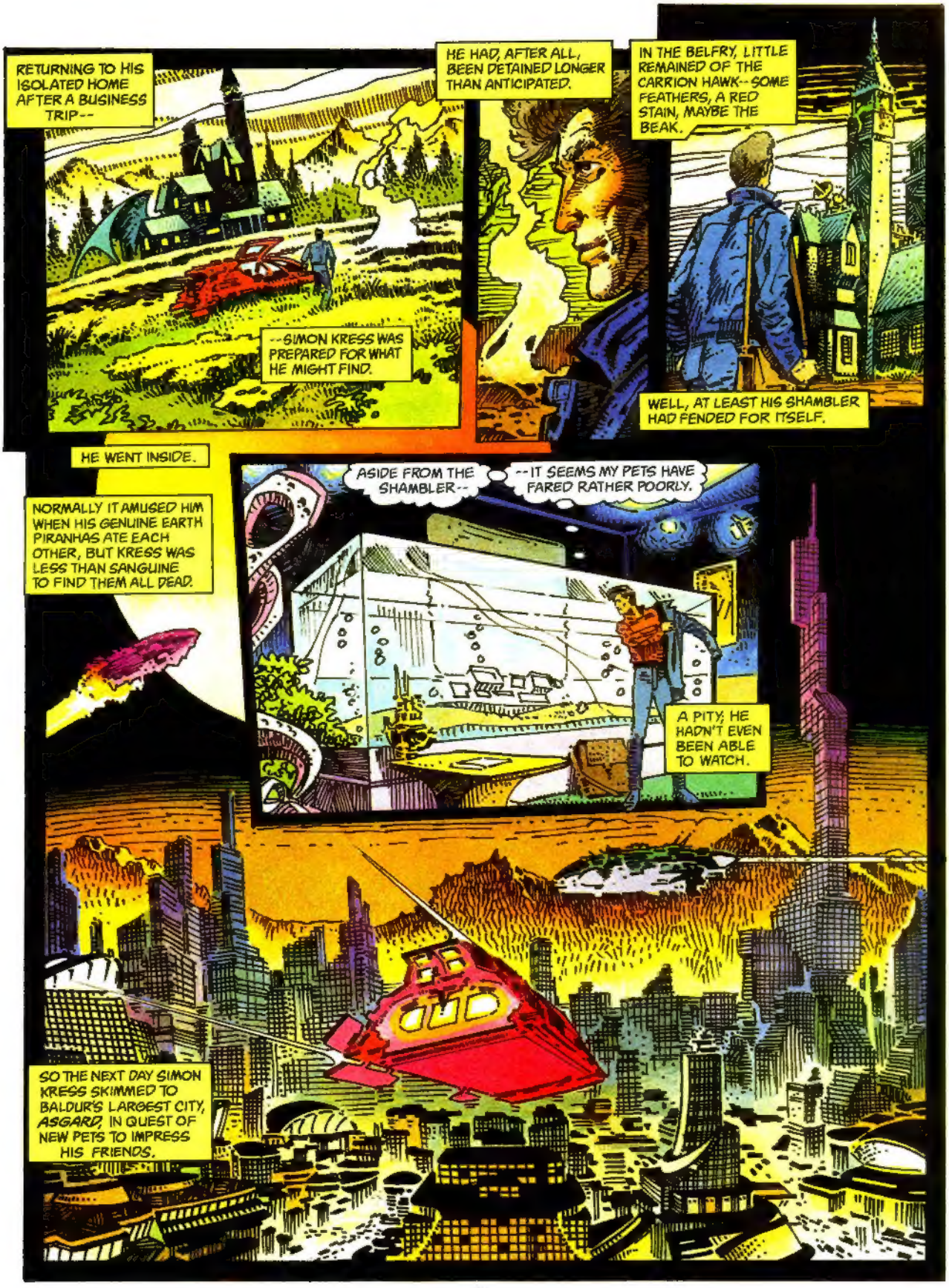
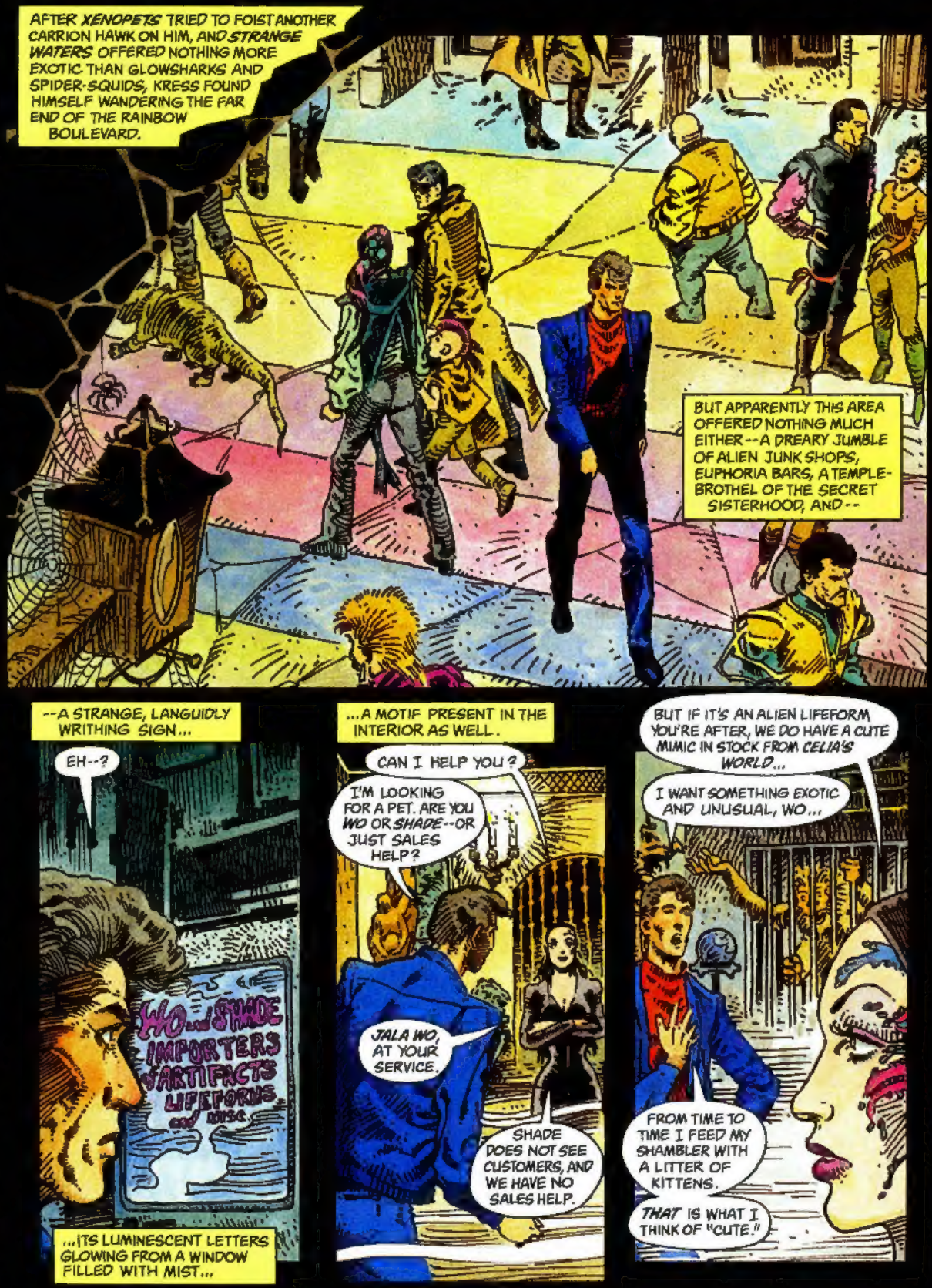
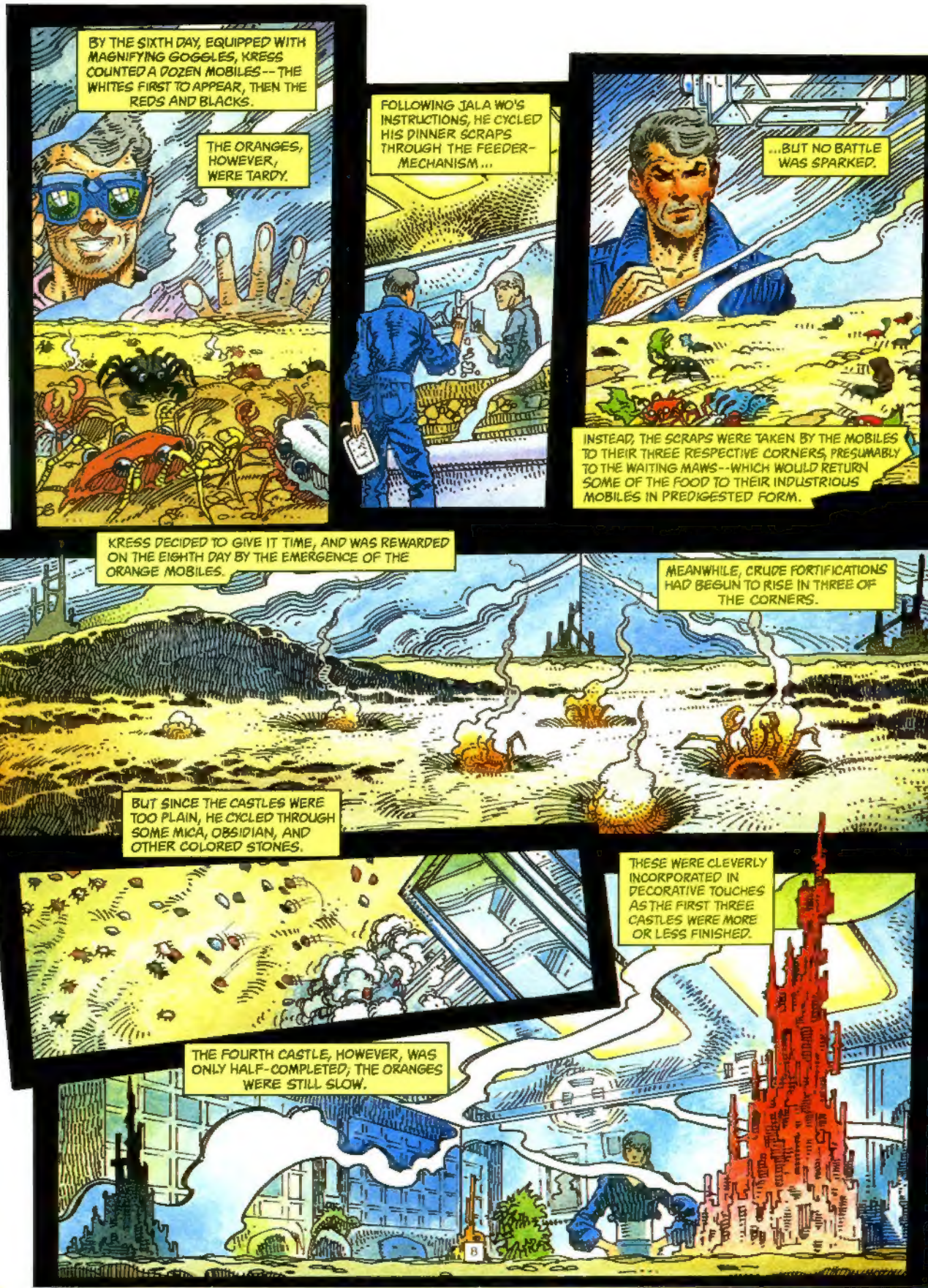

RETURNING TO HIS ISOLATED HOME AFTER A BUSINESS TRIP--
--SIMON KRESS WAS PREPARED FOR WHAT HE MIGHT FIND.
HE HAD, AFTER ALL, BEEN DETAINED LONGER THAN ANTICIPATED.
IN THE BELFRY, LITTLE REMAINED OF THE CARRION HAWK--SOME FEATHERS, A RED STAIN, MAYBE THE BEAK.
WELL, AT LEAST HIS SHAMBLER HAD FENDED FOR ITSELF.
HE WENT INSIDE.
NORMALLY IT AMUSED HIM WHEN HIS GENUINE EARTH PIRANHAS ATE EACH OTHER, BUT KRESS WAS LESS THAN SANGUINE TO FIND THEM ALL DEAD.
ASIDE FROM THE SHAMBLER--
--IT SEEMS MY PETS HAVE FARED RATHER POORLY.
A PITY, HE HADN'T EVEN BEEN ABLE TO WATCH.
SO THE NEXT DAY SIMON KRESS SKIMMED TO BALDUR'S LARGEST CITY, *ASGARD*, IN QUEST OF NEW PETS TO IMPRESS HIS FRIENDS.

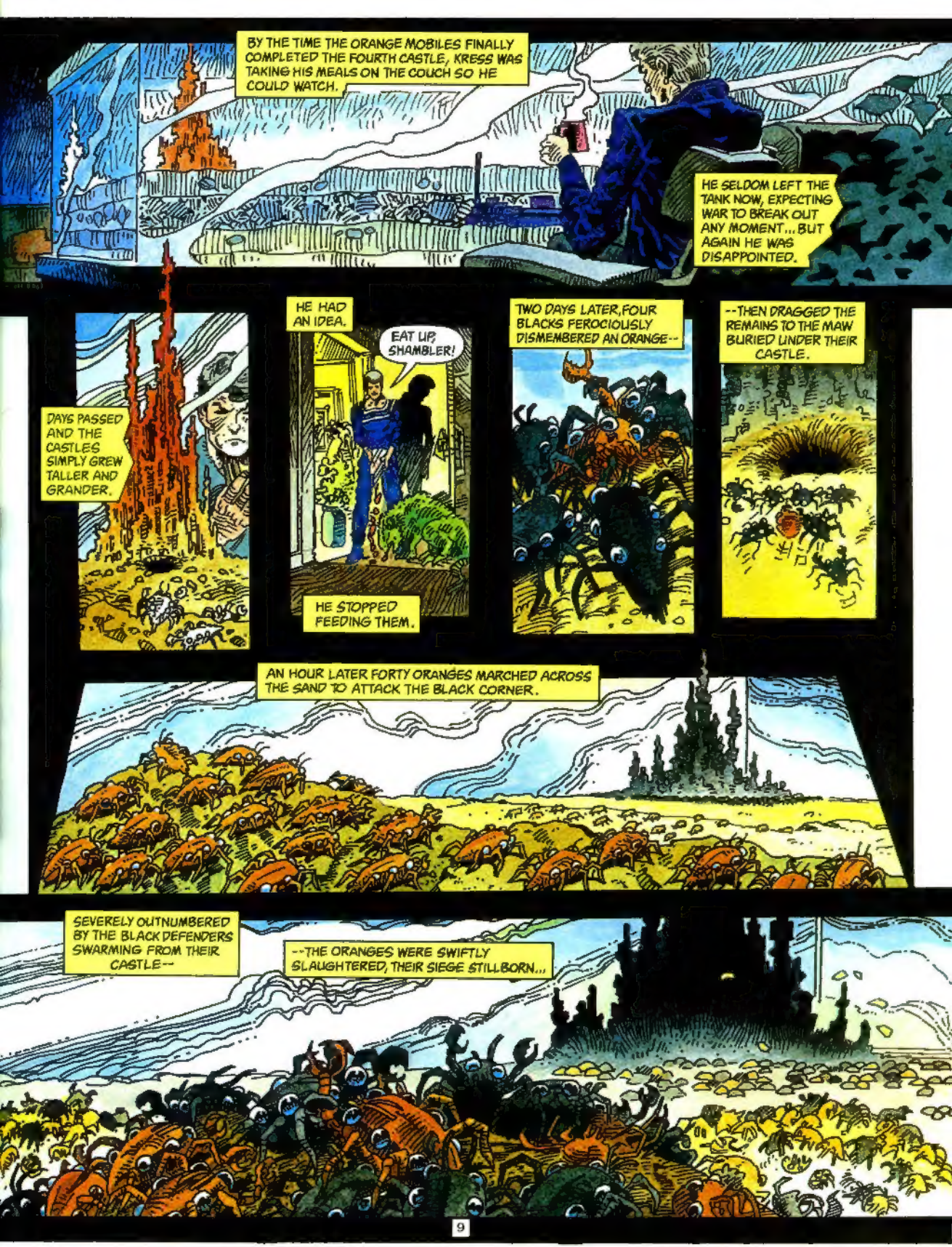

AFTER XENOPETS TRIED TO FOIST ANOTHER CARRION HAWK ON HIM, AND STRANGE WATERS OFFERED NOTHING MORE EXOTIC THAN GLOWSHARKS AND SPIDER-SQUIDS, KRESS FOUND HIMSELF WANDERING THE FAR END OF THE RAINBOW BOULEVARD.
BUT APPARENTLY THIS AREA OFFERED NOTHING MUCH EITHER--A DREARY JUMBLE OF ALIEN JUNK SHOPS, EUPHORIA BARS, A TEMPLE-BROTHEL OF THE SECRET SISTERHOOD, AND--
--A STRANGE, LANGUIDLY WRITHING SIGN...
EH--?
WO and SHADE IMPORTERS of ARTIFACTS LIFEFORMS and MISC.
...ITS LUMINESCENT LETTERS GLOWING FROM A WINDOW FILLED WITH MIST...
...A MOTIF PRESENT IN THE INTERIOR AS WELL.
CAN I HELP YOU?
I'M LOOKING FOR A PET. ARE YOU WO OR SHADE--OR JUST SALES HELP?
JALA WO, AT YOUR SERVICE.
SHADE DOES NOT SEE CUSTOMERS, AND WE HAVE NO SALES HELP.
BUT IF IT'S AN ALIEN LIFEFORM YOU'RE AFTER, WE DO HAVE A CUTE MIMIC IN STOCK FROM CELIA'S WORLD...
I WANT SOMETHING EXOTIC AND UNUSUAL, WO...
FROM TIME TO TIME I FEED MY SHAMBLER WITH A LITTER OF KITTENS.
THAT IS WHAT I THINK OF "CUTE."

I BEGIN TO APPRECIATE YOUR REFINED TASTES, SIR.
FOLLOW ME.
THROUGH THE MIST, AND BETWEEN CAGES OF MORE COMMON GROTESQUERIES...
INSECTS?
INTERESTING, PERHAPS... BUT STILL, LITTLE MORE THAN A GLORIFIED ANT FARM.
NO--THEY ARE CALLED SANDKINGS, FAR MORE COMPLEX AND INTELLIGENT THAN YOUR SHAMBLER. THEY SHARE HIVE-MINDS--OR IN THIS CASE, CASTLE MINDS.
AT THE MOMENT THERE ARE ONLY THREE ORGANISMS IN THE TANK, THE FOURTH HAVING... DIED... HER CASTLE NOW CRUMBLING.
THEY FIGHT WARS...
NOTE THE DIFFERING COLORS OF EACH GROUP'S ARMORED EXOSKELETONS--EVENTUALLY SHED WHEN THE CREATURES GROW LARGER, WHICH THEY WILL NOT DO IN A TANK OF THIS LIMITED SIZE.
THEIR CONFLICTS EVEN INCLUDE TRUCES AND ALLIANCES.
IT WAS AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE WHITES, REDS, AND ORANGES WHICH DESTROYED THE FOURTH CASTLE -- WHEN THE BLACKS BEGAN GETTING TOO NUMEROUS...
AMUSING, NO DOUBT, BUT INSECTS WAR TOO.

AH, BUT INSECTS DO NOT WORSHIP THEIR KEEPER.
EH? YOUR FACE! BUT HOW--?
I PROJECTED MY HOLOGRAM INTO THE TANK FOR A FEW DAYS --THE FACE OF THEIR GOD, YOU SEE.
I FEED THEM. I AM ALWAYS CLOSE. THEY SENSE ME WITH A RUDIMENTARY FORM OF PROXIMITY TELEPATHY--AND THEY WORSHIP ME BY DECORATING THEIR CASTLES WITH MY SCULPTED FACE.
BUT HOW DO THEY DO IT?
THE FOREMOST LIMBS DOUBLE AS ARMS--
--AND THEY COOPERATE WELL, IN BATTLE AND IN BUILDING, SINCE ALL THE MOBILES OF ONE COLOR, REMEMBER, SHARE A SINGLE HIVEMIND.
"MOBILES"? TELL ME MORE.
EACH CASTLE CONTAINS A MAW--FEMALE, IMMOBILE, LARGE AS YOUR FIST, AND MY PUN.
THE MAW IS MOTHER, STOMACH, AND QUEEN--
--FEEDING PRE-DIGESTED PAP TO HER MOBILES, WHOSE STOMACHS CAN'T HANDLE ANYTHING ELSE...SO IF THE MAW DIES, THEY ALL DIE.
THE MAWS THEMSELVES WILL EAT ANYTHING--TABLE SCRAPS...
LIVE FOOD?
THEY DEVOUR MOBILES FROM THE OTHER CASTLES, YES--THE SPOILS OF WAR.
I AM INTRIGUED... IF ONLY THEY WEREN'T SO SMALL...
SINCE THEIR GROWTH ADJUSTS TO AVAILABLE ENVIRONMENT, A LARGER TANK WOULD FIX THAT.
REMEMBERING HIS MUCH LARGER AND NOW USELESS PIRANHA TANK, SIMON KRESS BEGAN HAGGLING PRICE.

ARRIVING AT KRESS'S HOUSE THREE DAYS LATER, JALA WO AND HER WORKERS INSTALLED THE NEW PURCHASE...
ALL RIGHT, THE FOUR NESTS ARE DEEP ENOUGH.
IMPLANT THE MAWS.
THEY RESEMBLED NOTHING SO MUCH AS MOTTLED, HALF-SPOILED CHUNKS OF RAW MEAT WITH GAPING MOUTHS.
KRESS WAS PLEASED.
THE HEAT WILL BRING THE BURIED MAWS OUT OF DORMANCY IN A DAY OR SO, AND WITHIN A WEEK THE MOBILES WILL HATCH AND BURROW TO THE SURFACE.
BE SURE TO GIVE THEM PLENTY OF FOOD UNTIL THEY ARE WELL-ESTABLISHED--AND YOU SHOULD HAVE CASTLES RISING IN ABOUT THREE WEEKS.
THE FEEDER-CHAMBER MECHANISM WILL ENABLE YOU TO CARE FOR YOUR NEW PETS WITHOUT REMOVING THE TANK'S COVER...
YOU WOULD NOT WANT ANY MOBILES ESCAPING.
AS FOR THE CLIMATE CONTROLS, THEY ARE AUTOMATIC--YOU WANT IT DRY, BUT NOT TOO DRY.
AND MY FACE, WO? WHEN WILL THEY CARVE MY FACE?
"TURN ON YOUR HOLOGRAM AFTER ABOUT A MONTH--AND HAVE PATIENCE, MR. KRESS."
IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, WO AND SHADE ARE AT YOUR SERVICE.


BY THE SIXTH DAY, EQUIPPED WITH MAGNIFYING GOGGLES, KRESS COUNTED A DOZEN MOBILES -- THE WHITES FIRST TO APPEAR, THEN THE REDS AND BLACKS.
THE ORANGES, HOWEVER, WERE TARDY.
FOLLOWING JALA WO'S INSTRUCTIONS, HE CYCLED HIS DINNER SCRAPS THROUGH THE FEEDER-MECHANISM ...
...BUT NO BATTLE WAS SPARKED.
INSTEAD, THE SCRAPS WERE TAKEN BY THE MOBILES TO THEIR THREE RESPECTIVE CORNERS, PRESUMABLY TO THE WAITING MAWS -- WHICH WOULD RETURN SOME OF THE FOOD TO THEIR INDUSTRIOUS MOBILES IN PREDIGESTED FORM.
KRESS DECIDED TO GIVE IT TIME, AND WAS REWARDED ON THE EIGHTH DAY BY THE EMERGENCE OF THE ORANGE MOBILES.
MEANWHILE, CRUDE FORTIFICATIONS HAD BEGUN TO RISE IN THREE OF THE CORNERS.
BUT SINCE THE CASTLES WERE TOO PLAIN, HE CYCLED THROUGH SOME MICA, OBSIDIAN, AND OTHER COLORED STONES.
THESE WERE CLEVERLY INCORPORATED IN DECORATIVE TOUCHES AS THE FIRST THREE CASTLES WERE MORE OR LESS FINISHED.
THE FOURTH CASTLE, HOWEVER, WAS ONLY HALF-COMPLETED; THE ORANGES WERE STILL SLOW.


BY THE TIME THE ORANGE MOBILES FINALLY COMPLETED THE FOURTH CASTLE, KRESS WAS TAKING HIS MEALS ON THE COUCH SO HE COULD WATCH.
HE SELDOM LEFT THE TANK NOW, EXPECTING WAR TO BREAK OUT ANY MOMENT... BUT AGAIN HE WAS DISAPPOINTED.
DAYS PASSED AND THE CASTLES SIMPLY GREW TALLER AND GRANDER.
HE HAD AN IDEA.
EAT UP, SHAMBLER!
HE STOPPED FEEDING THEM.
TWO DAYS LATER, FOUR BLACKS FEROCIOUSLY DISMEMBERED AN ORANGE--
--THEN DRAGGED THE REMAINS TO THE MAW BURIED UNDER THEIR CASTLE.
AN HOUR LATER FORTY ORANGES MARCHED ACROSS THE SAND TO ATTACK THE BLACK CORNER.
SEVERELY OUTNUMBERED BY THE BLACK DEFENDERS SWARMING FROM THEIR CASTLE--
--THE ORANGES WERE SWIFTLY SLAUGHTERED, THEIR SIEGE STILLBORN...

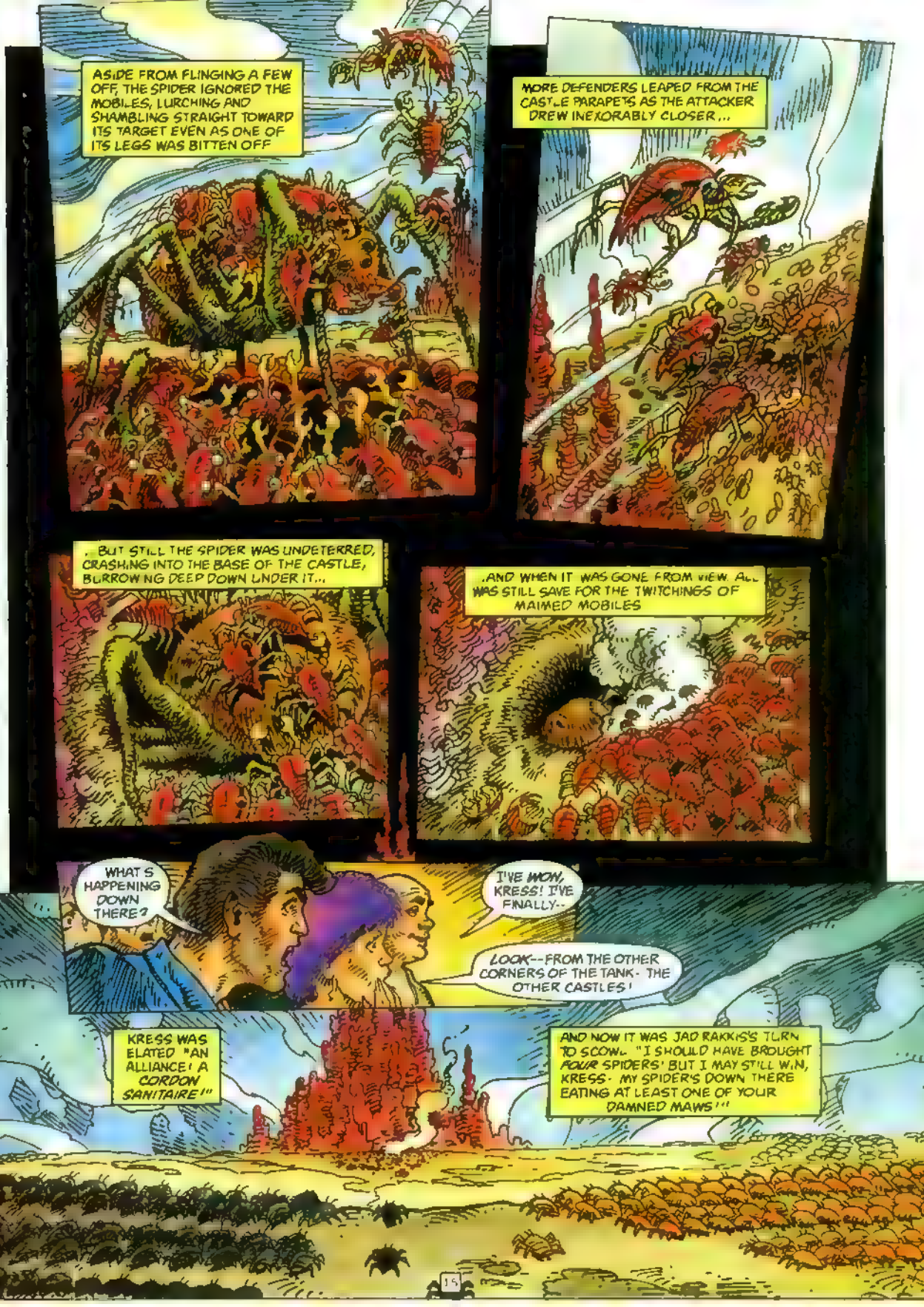
...AND UNTO THE BLACK MAW WAS RENDERED A FEAST.
WAR THEN FOLLOWED WAR, AND KRESS CONGRATULATED HIMSELF ON HIS GENIUS.
A MONTH TO THE DAY AFTER JALA WO DELIVERED THE SANDKINGS, KRESS ACTIVATED THE HOLOGRAPHIC PROJECTOR--
- BEAMING HIS IMAGE DOWN TO HIS PETS FROM THE SKY
THE WARS HALTED IMMEDIATELY AND ALL ACTIVITY WAS DIRECTED TOWARD WORSHIP.
KRESS FED THEM LAVISHLY--MANNA FROM HEAVEN.
THE *REDS* WERE THE MOST CREATIVE, USING TINY FLECKS OF SLATE TO PUT THE GRAY IN HIS HAIR
THE *WHITES'* DOL SEEMED YOUNGER, MORE MISCHIEVOUS...
...WHILE THE FACE SHAPED BY THE *BLACKS*, THOUGH VIRTUALLY THE SAME LINE FOR LINE--
-STRUCK KRESS AS WISE AND BENEFICENT
AS EVER, THE *ORANGE* SANDKINGS WERE LAST AND LEAST--
--THE R EFFORT PROVING CRUDELY CARTOONISH, AND LEAVING KRESS HELPLESSLY PIQUED

THE FIRST PARTY WAS A WILD SUCCESS, EVEN THOUGH KRESS KNEW SOME OF HIS GUESTS WOULD BE OFFENDED; INDEED, HE COUNTED ON IT
HE HAD INVITED JALA WO ON IMPULSE, TELLING HER TO BRING SHADE, BUT SHE ARRIVED ALONE AND QUICKLY LOST HERSELF IN THE CROWD
ALL RIGHT, PEOPLE -- GATHER ROUND THE TANK!
I HAVE A SPECIAL TREAT IN STORE
WHAT'S IN THERE, SIMON?
MY NEWEST PETS - SANDKINGS
HAVING BEEN STARVED FOR TWO DAYS IN PREPARA TION--
- THEY WERE IN A FIGHTING MOOD.
BY STRUGGLE'S END, THERE WERE NEARLY SIXTY DEAD MOBILES SPRAWLED ON THE SAND.
SIMON KRESS, YOU'RE *DISGUSTING!* I WAS A FOOL TO COME BACK HERE! I THOUGHT PERHAPS YOU'D CHANGED -- WANTED TO APOLOGIZE!
CATH M'LANE HAD LIVED WITH HIM TWO YEARS BEFORE -
-UNTIL HER SOPPY SENTIMENTALITY HAD ALMOST DRIVEN HIM MAD.
SHE HAD NEVER FORGIVEN HIM FOR LOCKING UP HIS SHAMBLER WITH HER PUPPY...
DON'T YOU *EVER* INVITE ME HERE AGAIN, SIMON!

AFTER THE LAUGHTER OF HIS OTHER GUESTS HAD DIED DOWN, JALA WO WAS THE ONLY ONE WITHOUT QUESTIONS...
WHERE DID THEY COME FROM, SIMON?
FROM WO AND SHADE, IMPORTERS
WHY DO THEY DECORATE THEIR CASTLES WITH YOUR FACE?
BECAUSE I AM THE SOURCE OF ALL GOOD THINGS
WILL THEY FIGHT AGAIN?
NOT TONIGHT--BUT THERE WILL BE OTHER PARTIES.
JAD RAKK S WAS AN AMATEUR XENOLOGIST.
THESE SANDKINGS ARE AMUSING, BUT...
BUT WHAT, JAD? AND DON'T GO PLAYING THE EXPERT AGAIN
BUT THEY'RE NOTHING, REALLY, COMPARED TO TERRAN SOLDIER ANTS.
THEY ARE NOT INSECTS!
HOW ABOUT A BETTING POOL NEXT TIME?
YES!
AND A DISCUSSION OF RULES ENSUED UNTIL THE PARTY BROKE UP...
JALA WO WAS LAST TO LEAVE
THE ORANGE CASTLE IS SHABBY.
SOMEONE MUST LOSE, AND THE ORANGES WERE SLOW IN GETTING STARTED.
ARE THEY BEING FED ENOUGH?
DIET.NG MAKES THEM FIERCER, WO.
THEIR OWN WARS ARE SUBTLE AND COMPLEX
--WHEREAS THE STRIFE OF HUNGER IS ARTLESS AND DEGRADING.

THIS IS MY HOUSE, WO! THEY DID NOT WAR ENOUGH TO SUIT ME! I CORRECTED THE SITUATION!
I WILL DISCUSS THE MATTER WITH SHADE..
THE HELL YOU WILL! IT IS NONE OF YOUR CONCERN OR HIS!
THEN I MUST BID YOU GOOD NIGHT.
BUT LOOK TO YOUR FACES, SIMON KRESS...
...LOOK TO YOUR FACES."
INDEED, THE CARVINGS DID SEEM MORE MALICIOUS, BUT KRESS DECIDED IT WAS MERE SUGGESTIBILITY, RESOLVING NEVER TO INVITE JALA WO AGAIN
IN THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED, BETTING OVER THE WAR GAMES BECAME SPIRITED.
I WIN AGAIN! ANOTHER HUNDRED STANDARDS, RAKKIS!
JAD RAKKIS, IN FACT, LOST HEAVILY--
DESPITE PROFESSING VAST KNOWLEDGE OF THE SANDKINGS, ACQUIRED THROUGH STUDY SINCE THE FIRST PARTY.
HAVING NO LUCK IN HIS OWN RESEARCH
KRESS ASSUMED IT WAS EMPTY BOASTING...

FINALLY, WHEN HIS LOSSES HAD BECOME HUGE, RAKKIS SHOWED UP WITH--
A SAND SPIDER, KRESS
I GOT IT FROM T'ETHERANE THE PETSELLER--USUALLY THEY REMOVE THE POISON SACS, BUT NOT THIS TIME.
A THOUSAND STANDARDS, SIMON--SAND SPIDER AGAINST SANDKINGS.
ALTHOUGH THE SANDKINGS HAD DOUBLED IN SIZE, THEY WERE DWARFED BY THE SPIDER...AND LACKING VENOM
BUT STILL, THERE WERE SO MANY OF THEM...
WHY NOT, JAD? THE WARS HAVE GROWN TIRESOME LATELY
HAH! YOU'LL BE SORRY, SIMON.
THE KATHADAYN SAND SPIDER'S NATURAL FOOD IS BURROWERS--IT'LL DIG STRAIGHT INTO THOSE CASTLES AND EAT THE MAWS!
THE OTHER GUESTS LAUGHED IN DELIGHT.
JUST DUMP THE THING INTO THE TANK, RAKKIS-AND LET'S GET ON WITH IT!
AT FIRST THE RED MOBILES STOOD FROZEN, WATCHING THE GIANT INTRUDER CREEP TOWARD THEIR CASTLE...
..BUT THE SUSPENSE WAS ABRUPTLY BROKEN AS MORE REDS CAME POURING OUT OF THE CASTLE AND OVER THE SMALL SAND HILLS--
. . .
--ALL BENT ON SUICIDALLY ATTACKING THE SPIDER.


ASIDE FROM FLINGING A FEW OFF, THE SPIDER IGNORED THE MOBILES, LURCHING AND SHAMBLING STRAIGHT TOWARD ITS TARGET EVEN AS ONE OF ITS LEGS WAS BITTEN OFF
MORE DEFENDERS LEAPED FROM THE CASTLE PARAPETS AS THE ATTACKER DREW INEXORABLY CLOSER...
...BUT STILL THE SPIDER WAS UNDETERRED, CRASHING INTO THE BASE OF THE CASTLE, BURROWING DEEP DOWN UNDER IT...
...AND WHEN IT WAS GONE FROM VIEW, ALL WAS STILL SAVE FOR THE TWITCHINGS OF MAIMED MOBILES
WHAT'S HAPPENING DOWN THERE?
I'VE WON, KRESS! I'VE FINALLY--
LOOK--FROM THE OTHER CORNERS OF THE TANK- THE OTHER CASTLES!
KRESS WAS ELATED "AN ALLIANCE! A CORDON SANITAIRE!"
AND NOW IT WAS JAD RAKKIS'S TURN TO SCOWL. "I SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT FOUR SPIDERS! BUT I MAY STILL WIN, KRESS- MY SPIDER'S DOWN THERE EATING AT LEAST ONE OF YOUR DAMNED MAWS!"

BUT FINALLY, IT WAS A SWARM OF RED MOBILES WHICH EMERGED FROM THE DAMAGED PORTAL...
..AND THE OTHER THREE ARMIES DISSOLVED, MOVING BACK TOWARD THEIR RESPECTIVE CORNERS.
JAD, I THINK YOU'RE A BIT CONFUSED ABOUT WHO'S EATING WHOM.
QUITE A FEAST FOR MY RED MAW--AND MORE THAN ENOUGH NOURISHMENT TO REPLACE HER LOST MOBILES.
THE NEXT WEEK IT WAS FOUR SLIM SILVER SNAKES.
A WEEK LATER IT WAS A BIRD.
AND A WEEK AFTER THAT, ARMORED BEETLES WERE TRIED
BUT THE RESULT NEVER VARIED...
TOUGH LUCK AGAIN, JAD.
...AND JAD RAKKIS WAS REDUCED TO PROMISSORY NOTES.

LEAVING AN EXPENSIVE ASGARD RESTAURANT ONE NIGHT SOON AFTER, KRESS CHANCED UPON--
CATH M'LANE-- WE'VE MISSED YOU AT THE WEEKLY WAR GAMES
THEY'VE BECOME MUCH MORE EXCITING OF LATE
SIMON KRESS, SOMEONE MUST PUT A STOP TO YOU-- AND I GUESS IT'LL HAVE TO BE ME!
KRESS, OF COURSE, GAVE LITTLE THOUGHT TO THE THREAT...
...UNTIL SEVERAL DAYS LATER
POLICE--? BUT WHAT--
WE'VE HAD COMPLAINTS OF DANGEROUS INSECTS OUT HERE.
THEY... THEY'RE NOT INSECTS
YOU'RE RIGHT, MR. KRESS--THEY LOOK WORSE THAN INSECTS, AND I DOUBT THEY'VE BEEN CLEARED BY THE ECOLOGY BOARD.
DO YOU HAVE A LICENSE FOR THEM? WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?
FROM WO AND SHADE, IMPORTERS
NEVER HEARD OF 'EM-- PROBABLY SMUGGLED IN, WHICH MEANS CONFISCATION OF THE ENTIRE TANK AND SOME STIFF FINES.
AH, WOULD A HUNDRED STANDARDS RIGHT NOW--
ADDING BRIBERY TO THE CHARGES?
ONLY WHEN THE FIGURE REACHED TWO THOUSAND WAS IT ARRANGED.
WON'T BE EASY WIPING THE COMPLAINT RECORD, YOU KNOW, AND WHAT IF SHE CALLS AGAIN?
I'LL TAKE CARE OF HER.

KRESS IMMEDIATELY CALLED T'ETHERANE THE PETSELLER.
A PUPPY, KRESS--FOR YOU?
A SPECIFIC KIND OF CUTE PUPPY
NEXT HE CALLED IDI NORREDIAN.
AND THE REASON FOR COMING OUT WITH MY HOLO CAMERA, SIMON?
I WANT TO RECORD A GIFT, IDI.
AND WHEN THE RECORDING HAD BEEN MADE...
THANKS AGAIN, IDI.
SEE YOU AT THE NEXT PARTY.
..HE SETTLED IN TO WATCH THE BLACKS REPAIR THEIR CASTLE, LEFT IN RUINS BY THE PUPPY.
EH--?
BUT THEN HE NOTICED THE FACES, SO SWIFTLY ALTERED...
THE ORANGES' IMAGE WAS BLOATED, TWISTED, MALEVOLENT.
THE REDS HAD GIVEN HIM A SATANIC SMILE
AND TO THE WHITES, HIS FAVORITES, HE HAD BECOME A CRUEL, IDIOT GOD.
YOU... DARE?
YOU DARE MOCK ME?
I'LL SHOW YOU WRATH!

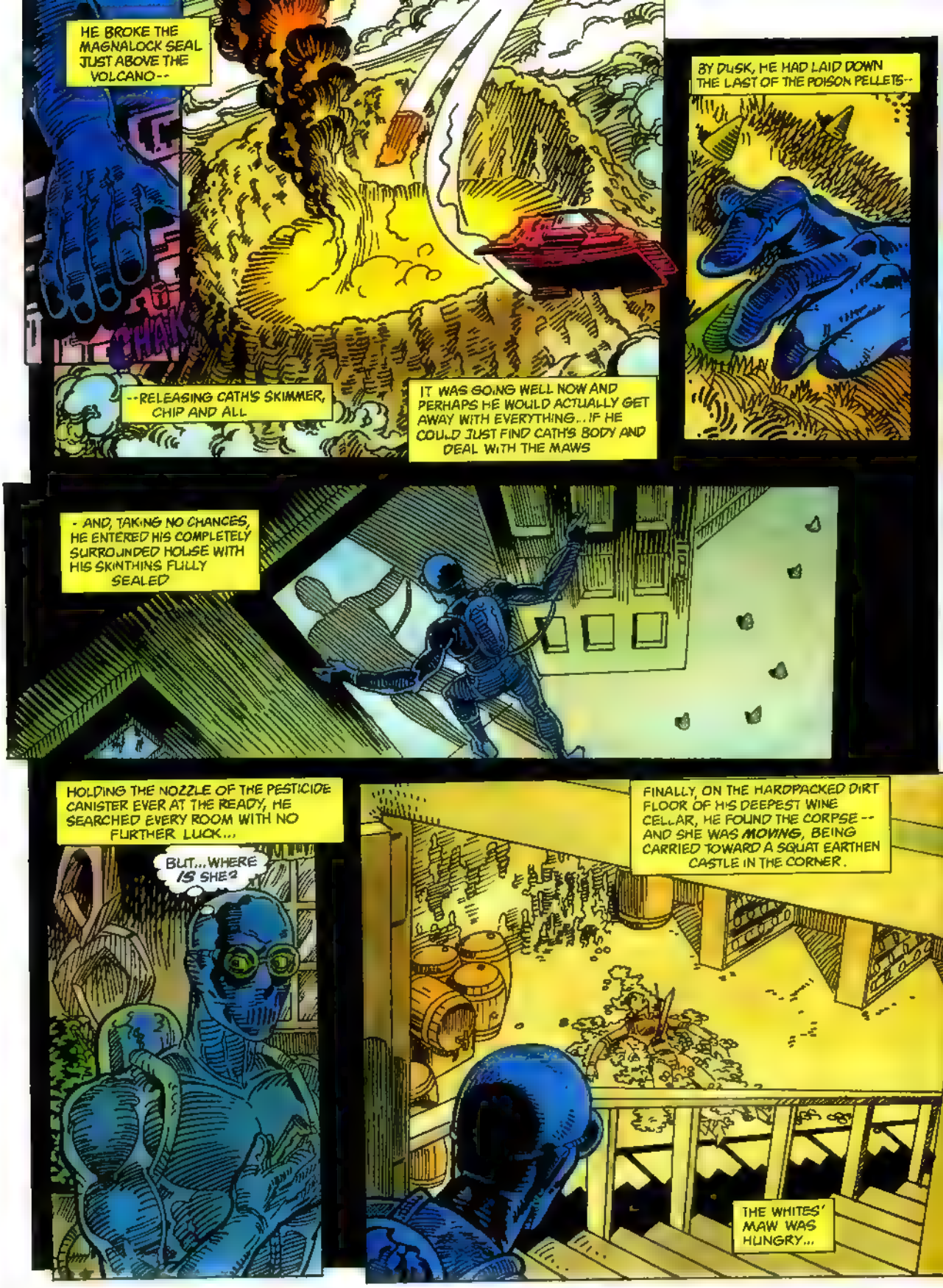
I'LL SHOW YOU THE HAND OF GOD!
CHOOK
CHUK CHUK CHUK CHUK
HE BEGAN SLASHING AND CHOPPING THE WHITE CASTLE, OBLITERATING THE PARODY OF HIS FACE IN A FRENZIED SPRAY OF SAND
...UNTIL--
CHKSHH
--ALL THE WHITE MOBILES ABRUPTLY DROPPED DEAD
MY GOD, THE MAW!
HAVE I KILLED IT--?
NO...THE MOBILES ARE MOVING AGAIN... SLOWLY...WEAKLY... BUT THEY'RE--
EEEYAAAHH!

DROPPING THE ORNAMENTAL SWORD, KRESS SLAPPED THE RED MOBILES TO THE FLOOR.
STOMP STOMP STOMP STOMP STOMP
FRANTICALLY, HE SLAMMED THE LID BACK IN PLACE, SEALING THE TANK.
YOU MONSTERS! YOU FIENDS!
YOU... MUST... BE...
...PUNISHED!
THEN HE STABBED AT THE TANK'S CLIMATE CONTROLS..
...AND BY THE TIME HE'D DROWNED HIS HORROR, THE SAND CASTLES WERE MELTING IN THE RAIN

OHHH.
BAMP BAMP BAMP
HIS HEAD THE NEXT MORNING FELT AWFUL, BUT THE POUNDING ACTUALLY CAME FROM THE DOOR...
C-CATH...?
YOU MONSTER! THANKS TO THE HOLO "GIFT" ID I DROPPED OFF, I CRIED ALL NIGHT!
BUT NO MORE, SIMON, NO MORE!
EASY, CATH... I'VE GOT A HANGOVER
SHE SWEPT PAST HIM, HER CAPE SWIRLING OPEN...
YOU LIKE THEM SO MUCH? THEN YOU CAN LIVE WITH THEM!
NO!
SKAK!
DON'T, CATH!
RUK!
STOP IT!
Y-YOU..
I...I DIDN'T MEAN... I ONLY WANTED TO..
...YOU... MONSTERRRRR
SKASH
21

FIRST THE AVALANCHE BURIED HER.
N-NO...
OH MY GOD... NO!!
THEN HORDES OF SANDKINGS BEGAN BURROWING FROM THE STILL-SPILLING SAND AND MUD
FINALLY, A PERFECTLY RANKED SQUARE OF RED MOBILES EMERGED, BEARING A HUNK OF RAW MEAT NOW THE SIZE OF A MAN'S HEAD
IT PULSED.
NYAAAAKHHH
AND THAT'S WHEN SIMON KRESS BROKE AND RAN.

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON (AND ONLY AFTER TWO HANGOVER TABS AND MUCH COFFEE IN A RESTAURANT SOME FIFTY KILOMETERS AWAY) BEFORE HE GATHERED THE COURAGE TO FACE HIS SITUATION...
HAVE TO GET RID OF THE EVIDENCE...DISPOSE OF THE BODY AND HER SKIMMER...AND HOPE SHE TOLD NO ONE WHERE SHE WAS GOING THIS MORNING...
HE WENT SHOPPING
THEY'RE PROBABLY EVERYWHERE BY NOW, INFESTING THE WHOLE HOUSE...
VERY WELL, THAT LEFT THE SANDKINGS.
...BUT I DON'T HAVE TO ACCOUNT FOR EVERY MOB...E--JUST THE FOUR MAWS, AND THE REST WILL DROP DEAD
LET'S SEE...SKINTHINS, GOGGLES, POISON PELLETS, PESTICIDE CANISTER, AND A MAGNALOCK...COMING TO A TOTAL OF 197 STANDARDS.
BACK HOME THERE WAS BAD LUCK, CATH'S BODY WAS GONE, AND THERE WAS NO TIME TO SEARCH FOR IT...
HIS FIRST PIECE OF GOOD LUCK WAS FINDING THE CRYSTAL CHIP OF IDI NORREDIAN'S PUPPY HOLO ON THE FRONT SEAT OF CATH'S SKIMMER
HE HAD WORRIED ABOUT THAT
...NOT WHEN SOMEONE MIGHT ARRIVE AT ANY MOMENT TO FIND THE INCRIMINATING SKIMMER OUTSIDE


HE BROKE THE MAGNALOCK SEAL JUST ABOVE THE VOLCANO--
--RELEASING CATH'S SKIMMER, CHIP AND ALL
IT WAS GOING WELL NOW AND PERHAPS HE WOULD ACTUALLY GET AWAY WITH EVERYTHING... IF HE COULD JUST FIND CATH'S BODY AND DEAL WITH THE MAWS
BY DUSK, HE HAD LAID DOWN THE LAST OF THE POISON PELLETS--
- AND, TAKING NO CHANCES, HE ENTERED HIS COMPLETELY SURROUNDED HOUSE WITH HIS SKINTHINS FULLY SEALED
HOLDING THE NOZZLE OF THE PESTICIDE CANISTER EVER AT THE READY, HE SEARCHED EVERY ROOM WITH NO FURTHER LUCK...
BUT...WHERE IS SHE?
FINALLY, ON THE HARDPACKED DIRT FLOOR OF HIS DEEPEST WINE CELLAR, HE FOUND THE CORPSE -- AND SHE WAS MOVING, BEING CARRIED TOWARD A SQUAT EARTHEN CASTLE IN THE CORNER.
THE WHITES' MAW WAS HUNGRY...

BUT IT WAS SO ABSURD HE ALMOST LAUGHED, EVEN AS HIS FINGER SOUGHT THE TRIGGER ON THE PESTICIDE HOSE
THE MAW MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET CATH'S HEAD IN ITS MOUTH, BUT HARDLY MORE THAN THAT...
AND THAT'S WHEN THE INSPIRATION STRUCK HIM
HOLD ON, BOYS -- CATH ALWAYS WAS HARD TO SWALLOW, ESPECIALLY FOR ONE THE SIZE OF YOUR MAW...
...SO I'LL BE RIGHT BACK TO GIVE YOU SOME HELP
"AFTER ALL, WHAT ARE GODS FOR?"
SIMON KRESS SLEPT IN HIS SKINTHING THAT NIGHT, THE PESTICIDE CANISTER HIS METAL LOVER, BUT HE DID NOT NEED IT
THEIR MAW SATED, THE WHITES REMAINED IN THE CELLAR, AND THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THE OTHERS
HE BEGAN CLEANING UP THE NEXT MORNING.
WHEN HE FINISHED, THERE WOULD BE NO SIGN OF THE MURDER STRUGGLE SAVE FOR THE SHATTERED TANK ITSELF.
AFTER LUNCH HE FOUND THE BLACKS IN HIS ROCK GARDEN, THEIR NEW CASTLE HEAVY WITH OBSIDIAN AND QUARTZ.

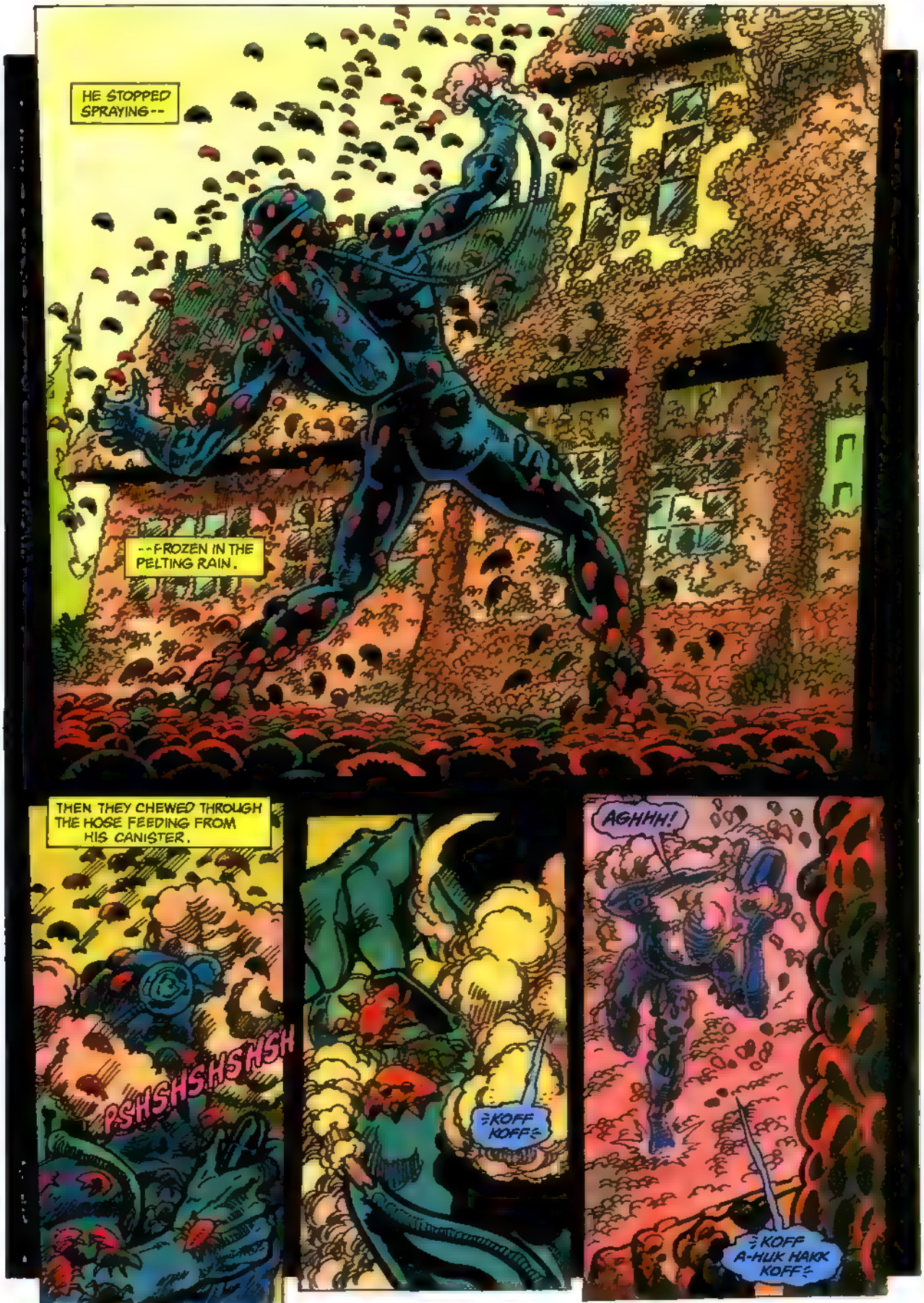
THE REDS WERE AT THE BOTTOM OF HIS UNUSED SWIMMING POOL
THE SAND AND SOIL WHICH HAD COLLECTED IN IT OVER THE YEARS WAS NOW, OF COURSE, A CASTLE
STILL, SINCE MOBILES OF BOTH COLORS WERE TAKING THE BAITED POISON PELLETS, HE DECIDED NOT TO RISK A FIGHT WITH THE PESTICIDE.
THEIR MAWS SHOULD BE DEAD BY EVENING
AFTER CIRCLING HIS ESTATE, HE GAVE UP LOOKING FOR THE BURNT-ORANGES WHO WERE NO DOUBT OUT HERE TOO...
...AND NO DOUBT ALSO BEARING POISON PELLETS TO THEIR MAW.
HE RETURNED TO THE HOUSE WITH SMUG SATISFACTION IN HIS EVERY SPRINGY STEP
KRNCH
YES, EVERYTHING WAS PERFECTLY UNDER CONTR--
BZZ BZZ
IT WAS JAD RAKKIS
WELL, SIMON, WAIT'LL YOU SEE THE CANNIBAL WORMS I'VE GOT FOR TONIGHT'S WAR GAMES.
OH, JAD, I GUESS I, UH... NEGLECTED TO TELL YOU...
I GOT RID OF THE SANDKINGS -- MESSY, BOTHERSOME THINGS...
THEN WHAT'LL I DO WITH MY WORMS?
PUT 'EM IN SOME FRUIT FOR A LOVED ONE

THEN KRESS QUICKLY PUNCHED A STRING OF CALLS TO CANCEL THE WEEKLY PARTY, OMITTING ONLY ONE OF HIS USUAL GUESTS..
HE HAD BECOME AWARE, YOU SEE, OF ONE LAST OVERSIGHT
COME IN, ID!-- THE PARTY'S BEEN CANCELED, BUT I THOUGHT YOU AND I MIGHT SPEND THE EVENING ALONE.
WONDERFUL, SIMON!
AND YOU MUST TELL ME CATH'S REACTION TO OUR LITTLE PUPPY HOLO
OF COURSE, BUT FIRST COME TO THE WINE CELLAR AND HELP ME SELECT A FRESH VINTAGE...
MMM...WHAT DO YOU HAVE IN MIND, SIMON?
YOU'LL SEE
AFTER YOU, DEAR ID!.
BUT WHERE ARE THE LIGHTS?
AND THAT SMELL...WHAT'S THAT PECULIAR SMELL, SI--
MONARCH
ANOTHER SKIMMER FOR THE VOLCANO...
SLASH
KLITCH
BUT JUST AS WELL...
THE SCREAMING PROBABLY WOULDN'T STOP FOR HOURS.

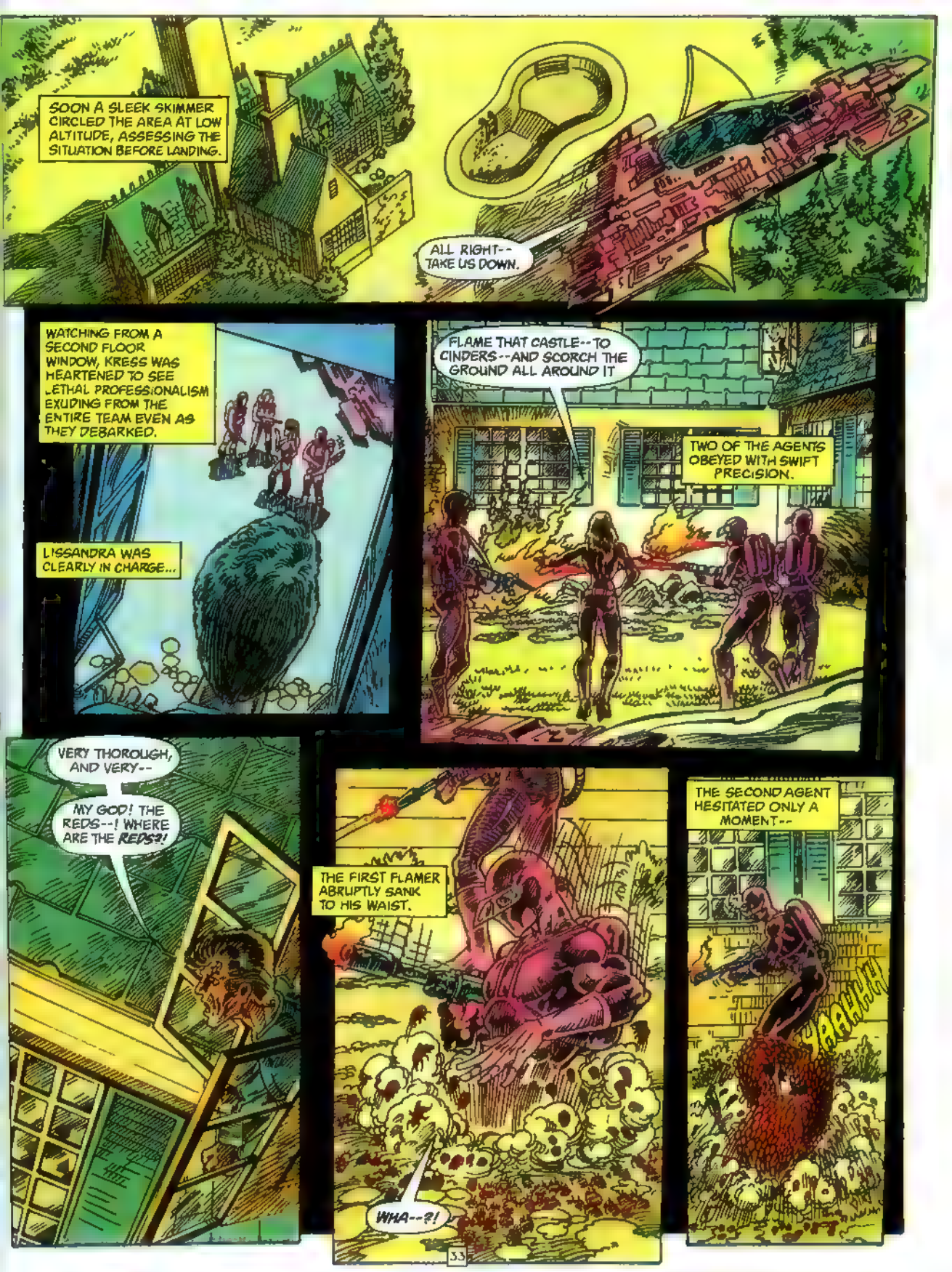
IN THE MORNING HE HEARD ODD SCRABBLING SOUNDS FROM THE OTHER SIDE, ALTHOUGH IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE THAT IDI WAS STILL ALIVE ...
SO IT MUST BE THE SAND-KINGS.
AND THAT WORRIED HIM
HE DECIDED TO LEAVE THE DOOR SEALED WHILE HE WENT OUT TO BURY THE BLACK AND RED MANS.
BUT THE BLACKS WERE STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE ...
..AND SO WERE THE REDS, NO DOUBT SUBSISTING ON ROCKJOCKS AND--
WH--?! SOMETHING ON MY LEG--!
YAHHH!!
WHANG
THEY WERE HEMMING HIM IN, FORCING HIM TOWARD THE POOL--
--HUNGRY FOR SOMETHING MORE THAN A SCRAWNY ROCKJOCK.
NOOO!!
INDEED, THEY WERE NOW MUCH LARGER THAN HE REMEMBERED

WAM WAM WAM
GET OFF ME!!
SO THE SANDKINGS WERE IMPERVIOUS TO POISON PELLETS
HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN -- WO WARNED HIM THE MAWS WOULD EAT ANYTHING
VERY WELL...
.. IT WOULD HAVE TO BE WAR -- WITH THE PESTICIDE
THE SANDKINGS WERE WAITING FOR HIM, ALLIED AGAINST THE COMMON THREAT .
...APPARENTLY HAV NG LEARNED A THING OR TWO ABOUT BREEDING FROM THE ROCKJOCKS
FACING THE CREEP NG SEA OF HIS ENEM ES, KRESS OPENED THE VALVE OF HIS CANISTER --
-AND F RED THE FIRST SHOT OF THE WAR.
FSHSHSH

ENVELOPED BY THE THICK CLOUD OF PESTICIDE, THE SANDKINGS BEGAN TO ROLL OVER, TWITCHING.
KRESS SWEPT THE NOZZLE FROM SIDE TO SIDE, HIS CONFIDENCE MOUNTING.
INDEED, THE ARMIES BEGAN TO RETREAT...
...BUT THEN ABRUPTLY HALTED, JOINED BY A SWARMING TIDE OF REINFORCEMENTS.
UH-OH.
HIS CONFIDENCE WANED.
STILL, THE WEBFLEX MATERIAL OF HIS SKINTHINS WAS ADEQUATE PROTECTION...
...AND IF HE JUST KEPT SPRAYING, EVENTUALLY HE'D KILL THEM ALL, NO MATTER HOW MANY THERE WERE
BUT THEN.
WHAT THE--?
OH GOD.


HE STOPPED SPRAYING--
--FROZEN IN THE PELTING RAIN.
THEN THEY CHEWED THROUGH THE HOSE FEEDING FROM HIS CANISTER.
PSHSHSHSHSH
:KOFF KOFF:
AGHHH!
:KOFF A-HUK HAKK KOFF:

DAMN... DAMN!
KRUNSCH
KRSH
KRNCH
FOR NOW, THE WAR WAS OVER AND SIMON KRESS HAD SUFFERED A RESOUNDING DEFEAT.
YET HE CERTAINLY COULDN'T CALL THE POLICE--NOT TO CLEAN OUT THE CELLAR, ANYWAY.
CATH M'LANE MIGHT BE GONE BY NOW...
...BUT IDI NORREDIAN HADN'T EVEN BEEN CHOPPED INTO DIGESTIBLE PIECES YET. NO, NOT THE POLICE, AND HE DIDN'T TRUST JALA WO--SO IT HAD TO BE SOMEONE WHO WOULD DO AS HE ASKED WITHOUT QUESTIONS.
ANOTHER REMOVAL, SIMON?
YOU'LL BE WELL-PAID, LISSANDRA--I NEED YOU FOR A BIT OF..PEST CONTROL.
NO NEED FOR EUPHEMISMS, SIMON--THE CALL IS SHIELDED. WHOM DO YOU WANT--
I'M SERIOUS, LISSANDRA--A DANGEROUS PEST PROBLEM! YOU'LL NEED THREE OPERATIVES IN HEAT-RESISTANT SKINTHINS WITH FLAMETHROWERS OR LASERS! IN MY ROCK GARDEN AND SWIMMING POOL YOU'LL FIND BUGS--LOTS OF THEM!
DESTROY THEIR CASTLES AND KILL EVERYTHING INSIDE!
THEN KNOCK ON MY DOOR AND I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT ELSE NEEDS TO BE DONE
WE'LL LEAVE WITHIN THE HOUR, SIMON.


SOON A SLEEK SKIMMER CIRCLED THE AREA AT LOW ALTITUDE, ASSESSING THE SITUATION BEFORE LANDING.
ALL RIGHT-- TAKE US DOWN.
WATCHING FROM A SECOND FLOOR WINDOW, KRESS WAS HEARTENED TO SEE LETHAL PROFESSIONALISM EXUDING FROM THE ENTIRE TEAM EVEN AS THEY DEBARKED.
LISSANDRA WAS CLEARLY IN CHARGE...
FLAME THAT CASTLE--TO CINDERS--AND SCORCH THE GROUND ALL AROUND IT
TWO OF THE AGENTS OBEYED WITH SWIFT PRECISION.
VERY THOROUGH, AND VERY--
MY GOD! THE REDS--! WHERE ARE THE REDS?!
THE FIRST FLAMER ABRUPTLY SANK TO HIS WAIST.
WHA--?!
THE SECOND AGENT HESITATED ONLY A MOMENT--
AAIEEE!

--BEFORE INCINERATING HIS FELLOW OP AND RED SANDKINGS ALIKE.
FRUUHHH
WHEREUPON ANOTHER BOILING MASS OF REDS ERUPTED FROM THE GROUND COLLAPSING UNDER HIS FEET.
WH-WHAT THE--?
BOTH OF THEM!
FORGET HIM, LISSANDRA! JUST DESTROY THE BLACKS' CASTLE!
DO AS HE SAYS--AND USE THE LASER!
KRESS'S DIRT FACE DISINTEGRATED AS THE BEAM CHEWED THROUGH THE CASTLE
BUT THE BLACK MOBILES CONTINUED TO MOVE.
THE MAW WAS BURIED TOO DEEPLY...
KRUMPOOM
...FOR ANYTHING LESS THAN A BOMB.

NOW THE POOL! GET THE CASTLE IN THE POOL!
BACK TO THE SKIMMER-- WE'LL TAKE IT OUT FROM THE AIR
AND IT WAS ALL SO SIMPLE THEN.
AFTER THE FOURTH BOMBING RUN, THE SANDKINGS STOPPED MOVING.
TWO OPERATIVES, SIMON--NOT TO MENTION THE DANGER TO MY OWN LIFE.
THIS WILL COST YOU.
WHATEVER YOU ASK, JUST SO YOU FINISH THE JOB--BACK THERE, IN MY WINE CELLAR...
BUT NO BOMBS OR FLAME THROWER--I... I DON'T WANT MY HOUSE COMING DOWN AROUND ME.
THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN FIRE, SIMON.
NOW--IS THERE A LIGHT IN THERE?
JUST INSIDE THE DOOR. RIGHT SIDE. STAIRS STEEP.
KRESS FELT DISORIENTED AS LISSANDRA REACHED FOR THE SWITCH
I FEEL IT, BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM TO B--
EEEEEEE
THE TRANCE DEEPENED.

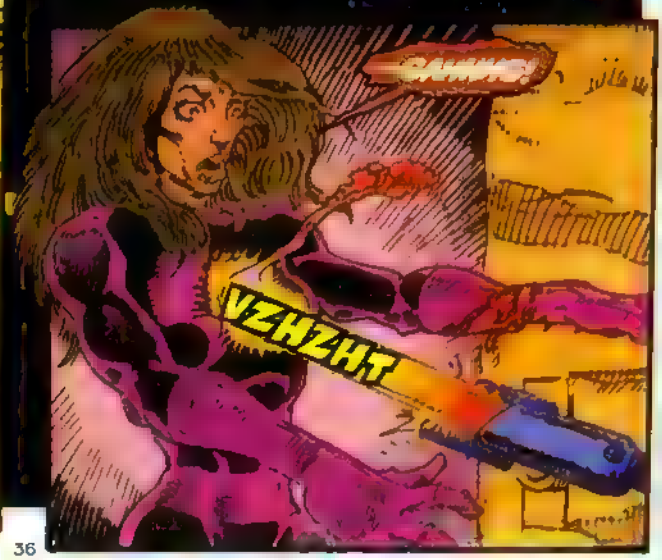
SPUKSH
MY HOUSE.

DON'T!
I'M NOT GOING DOWN THERE.
JUST STAND IN THE DOORWAY AND FLAME EVERYTHING.
LEAVE IT ALONE. MY MIND IS CHANGED.

ISSANDRA MISUNDERSTOOD, ASSUMING KRESS WAS SPEAKING TO HER.
YOUR LITTLE PET BIT CLEAN THROUGH MY SKINTHINS, SIMON. I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR HOUSE-- WHATEVER'S DOWN THERE IS GOING TO DIE.
DON'T!
KRESS HAD A VISION OF HIMSELF BORNE DOWN INTO DARKNESS BY A THOUSAND TINY ARMS ...

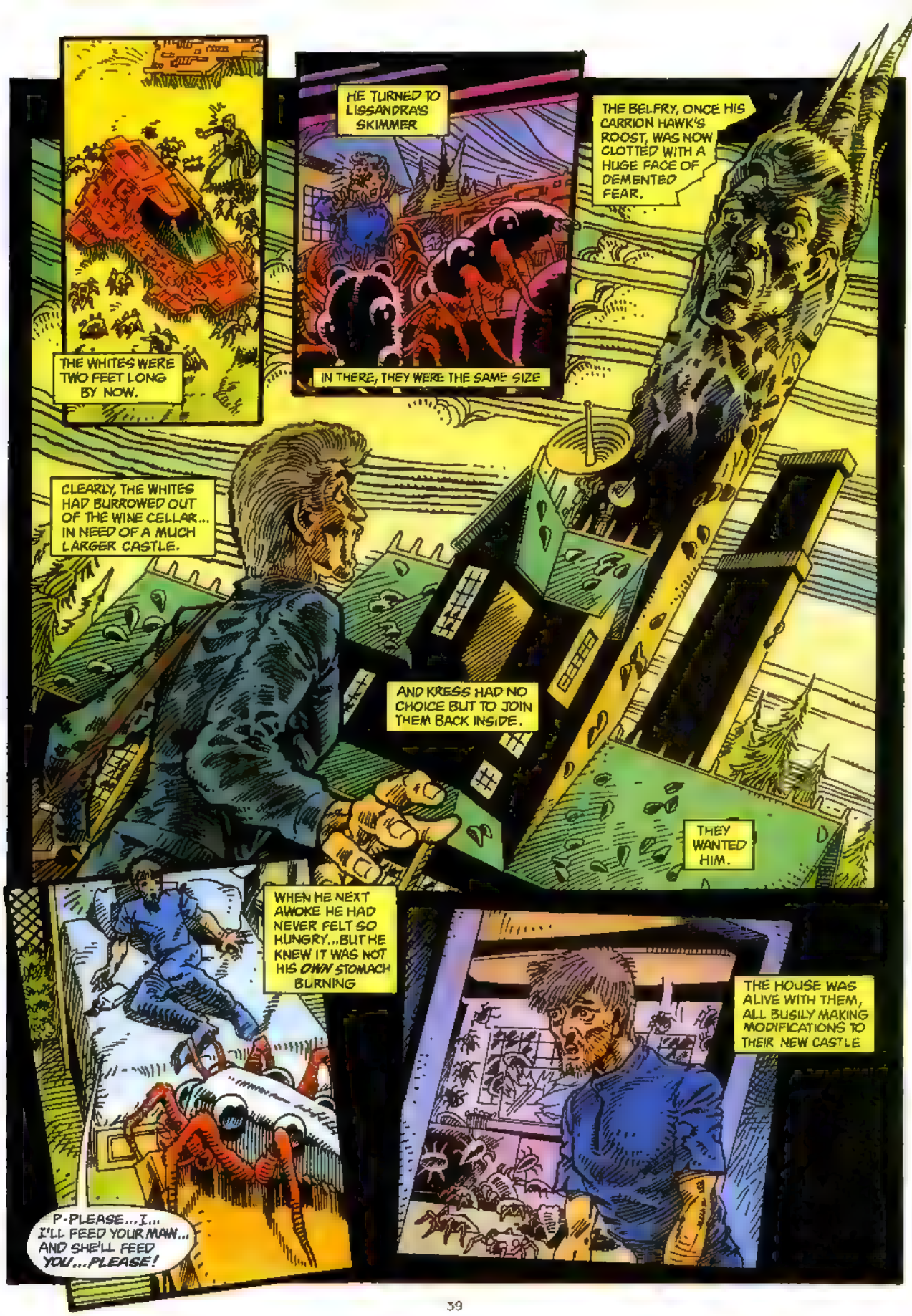
IT WAS A VISION HE COULD NOT ACCEPT
WUMP
HE FELT A SICKLY KIND OF EXCITEMENT, ALMOST SEXUAL.

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!
MAKING A PEACE. THEY WON'T HURT GOD, NO, NOT SO LONG AS GOD IS GOOD AND GENEROUS.
GOD? YOU'RE NO--

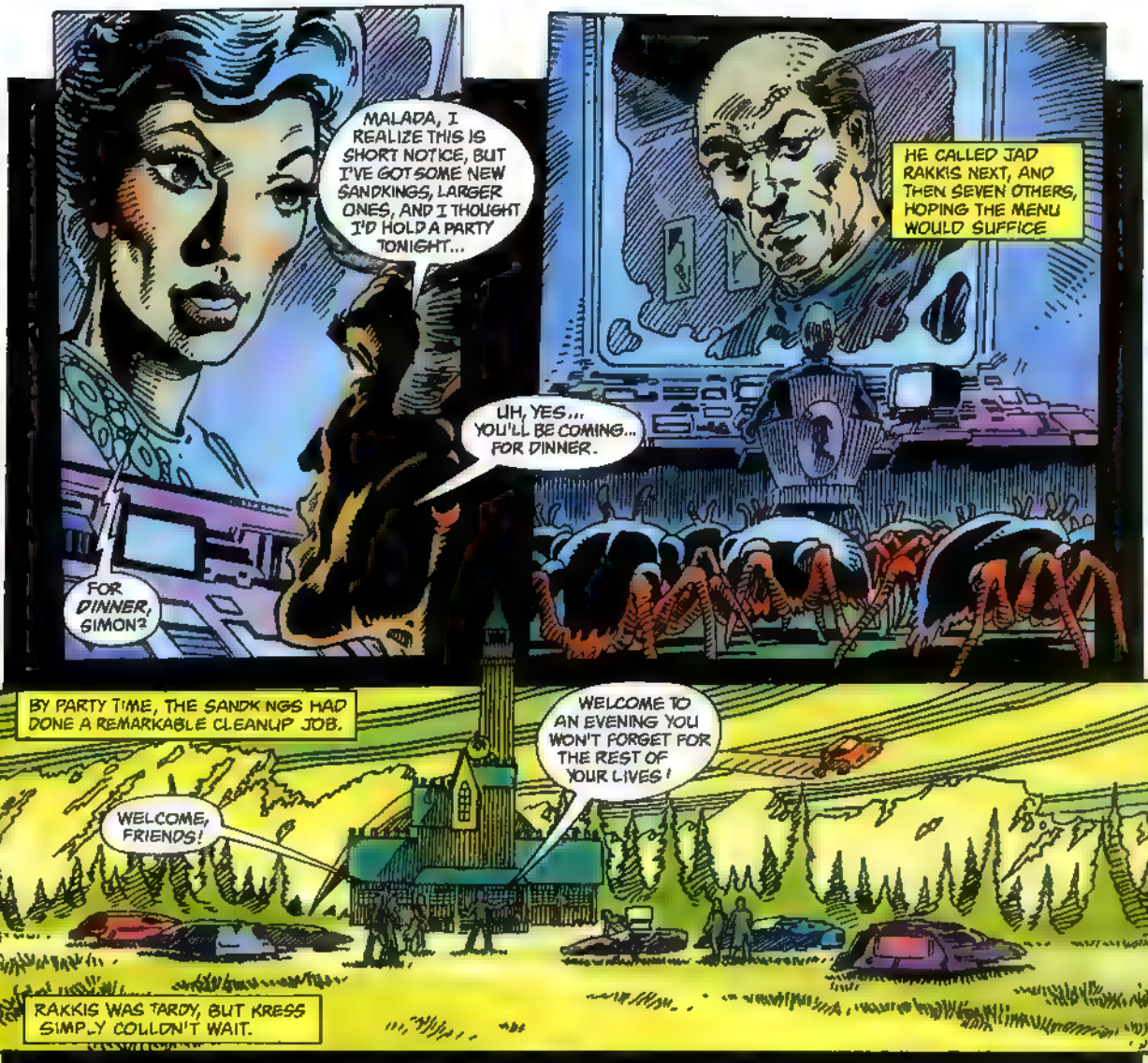

VZHZHT

I WAS CRUEL. STARVED THEM. NO MORE.
I HAVE TO MAKE UP FOR IT NOW, YOU SEE.
KLUMP BUMP BUMP
AND WHEN THE DOOR WAS AGAIN SEALED--
--KRESS WAS FILLED WITH A DEEP CONTENTMENT COATING HIS FEAR LIKE A LAYER OF SYRUP
HE SUSPECTED IT WAS NOT HIS OWN.
LATER, HE WANTED TO LEAVE, FLY TO THE CITY, BUT FOUND HE COULD DO NOTHING BUT DRINK AND SOB AND LISTEN TO THE AWFUL SOUNDS OF THINGS IN THE WALLS.
WHEN HE FINALLY AWOKE, THE SOUNDS WERE GONE.
HAD THEY BEEN NOTHING BUT DRUNKEN DELUSIONS?
WHY DID I DO IT? I COULD HAVE HELPED LISSANDRA BURN IT OUT, KILL IT.
SO WHY?
AND THEN HE KNEW
THE MAW HAD DONE IT, USING HIM.
WO SAID IT WAS PSIONIC, EVEN WHEN IT WAS SMALL... AND NOW IT'S LARGE, SO LARGE.
IT'S FEASTED ON CATH AND IDI... AND NOW IT HAS TWO MORE BODIES DOWN THERE...

IT'LL KEEP GROWING... AND IT'S LEARNED TO LIKE THE TASTE OF HUMAN FLESH...
AND, LARGE AS IT WAS, IT WOULDN'T BE LONG BEFORE IT GREW HUNGRY AGAIN
HE COULDN'T STAY
HIS SHAMBLER HAD GROWN GAUNT.
GET AWAY!
RAEEK
THE PICKINGS WERE NO DOUBT THIN ON THE GROUNDS LATELY.
BUT SINCE KRESS PLANNED NEVER TO RETURN, HIS PET COULDN'T MATTER LESS NOW.
PEERING OUT ACROSS THE BATTLEFIELD OF HIS FRONT YARD, HE HAD TO SUMMON HIS COURAGE, HEART THUDDING, REMINDING HIMSELF THAT ALL THE LITTERED SANDKINGS WERE DEAD.
THEY CRUNCHED UNDERFOOT
EVERY STEP OF THE WAY.
CRUNCH.
CRUNCH
CRACKLE
THEN HE REACHED HIS SKIMMER.
IT WAS ALREADY OCCUPIED.
MANDIBLES CLACKED.


THE WHITES WERE TWO FEET LONG BY NOW.
HE TURNED TO LISSANDRA'S SKIMMER
IN THERE, THEY WERE THE SAME SIZE
THE BELFRY, ONCE HIS CARRION HAWK'S ROOST, WAS NOW CLOTTED WITH A HUGE FACE OF DEMENTED FEAR.
CLEARLY, THE WHITES HAD BURROWED OUT OF THE WINE CELLAR... IN NEED OF A MUCH LARGER CASTLE.
AND KRESS HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO JOIN THEM BACK INSIDE.
THEY WANTED HIM.
WHEN HE NEXT AWOKE HE HAD NEVER FELT SO HUNGRY...BUT HE KNEW IT WAS NOT HIS *OWN* STOMACH BURNING
THE HOUSE WAS ALIVE WITH THEM, ALL BUSILY MAKING MODIFICATIONS TO THEIR NEW CASTLE
P-PLEASE...I... I'LL FEED YOUR MAN... AND SHE'LL FEED YOU...PLEASE!

OUTSIDE, KRESS FOUND THE TWO FLAMER OPS ALREADY REMOVED
AND THE MAW IS STILL HUNGRY...
INSIDE
OH MY GOD...
HIS SHAMBLER HAD MET ITS MATCH.
KRESS FRANTICALLY EMPTIED THE FREEZER AND CABINETS WHILE THE SANDKINGS WAITED
THE ENORMITY OF THE SITUATION --THE VORACIOUSNESS OF THEIR HUNGER--AT FIRST STUNNED HIM.
BUT AN HOUR LATER HE WAS CALM, HIS STOMACH PANGS ABATED, ALTHOUGH HE HAD NOT EATEN A THING
BUT HE KNEW THE RESPITE WOULD BE SHORT, BEFORE THE MAW AGAIN DEMANDED FEEDING.
HE WAS NOW A LARGE WHITE MOBILE.

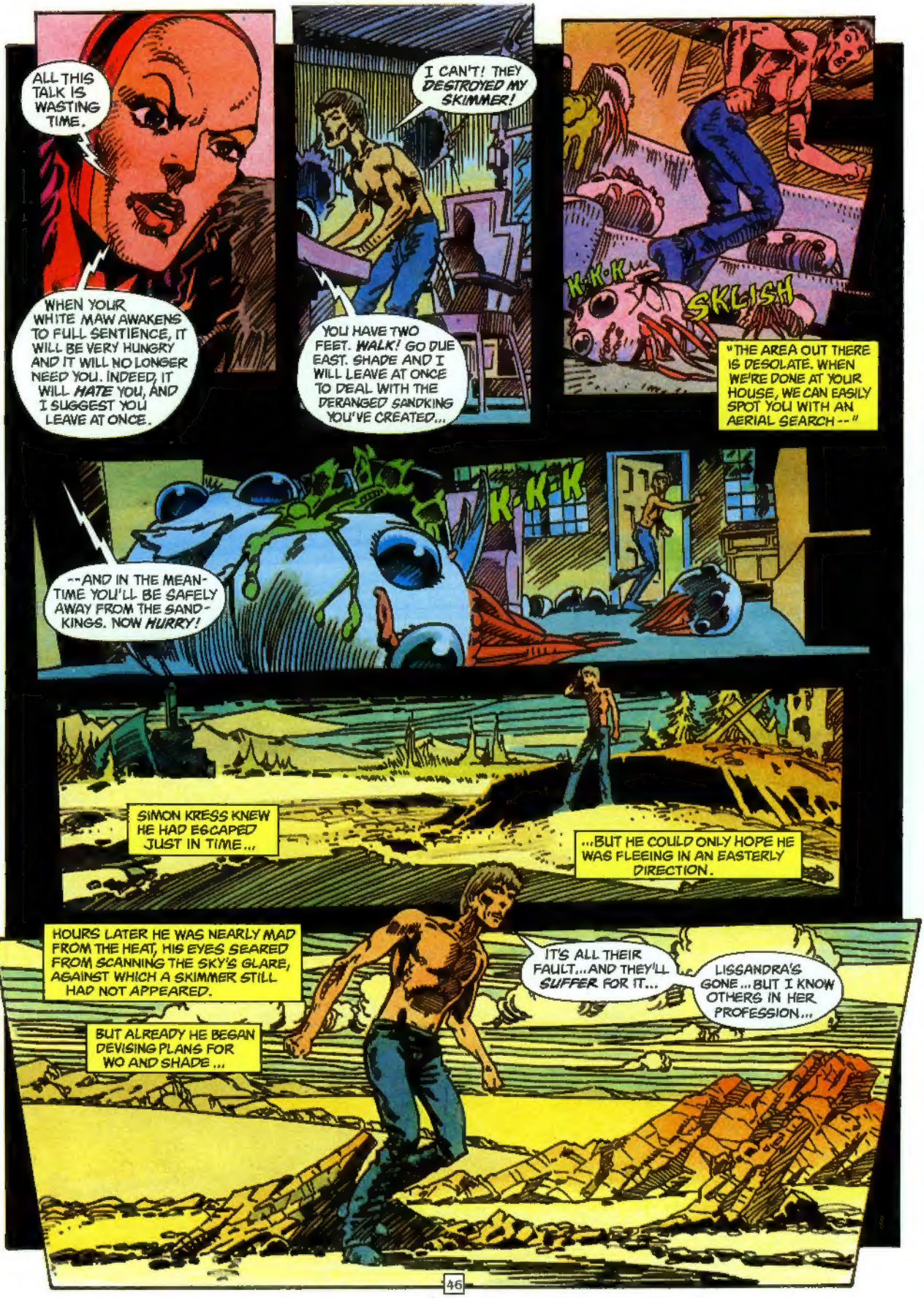

MALADA, I REALIZE THIS IS SHORT NOTICE, BUT I'VE GOT SOME NEW SANDKINGS, LARGER ONES, AND I THOUGHT I'D HOLD A PARTY TONIGHT...
FOR DINNER, SIMON?
UH, YES... YOU'LL BE COMING... FOR DINNER.
HE CALLED JAD RAKKIS NEXT, AND THEN SEVEN OTHERS, HOPING THE MENU WOULD SUFFICE
BY PARTY TIME, THE SANDKINGS HAD DONE A REMARKABLE CLEANUP JOB.
WELCOME, FRIENDS!
WELCOME TO AN EVENING YOU WON'T FORGET FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIVES!
RAKKIS WAS TARDY, BUT KRESS SIMPLY COULDN'T WAIT.
AFTER YOU, FRIENDS!
MY, BUT WE'RE GRACIOUS TONIGHT, SIMON.
EVERYBODY IN?
YES, SIMON, BUT WHY--
SLAM!
HE BOLTED FOR THE NEAREST SKIMMER.

BUT--
DAMN! IT'S BEEN PROGRAMMED TO LIFT ONLY IN RESPONSE TO THE OWNER'S PRINT! JUST AS ALL SKIMMERS ARE!
MUST BE LOSING MY MIND TO EVEN TRY THIS!
JAD!!
GET BACK IN YOUR SKIMMER, RAKKIS--HURRY! TAKE ME TO THE CITY! GET US OUT OF HERE!
KRESS, WHAT THE--
CHAK
KLAK
NYAHHRRR
WITH MANDIBLES NOW SO LARGE, THE SANDKINGS NO LONGER NEEDED THEIR GOD'S MEAT CLEAVER.
AND AFTER THAT--
--SIMON KRESS DID NOT TRY TO ESCAPE AGAIN...
...NOR DID HE TOUCH A MORSEL OF FOOD THE ENTIRE DAY...

...BUT HE FELL ASLEEP FEELING BLOATED, SATED AT LAST.
AND HIS LAST THOUGHTS BEFORE THE NIGHTMARES FOCUSED ON TOMORROW'S INVITATIONS
MORNING:
EH?
IT WAS SWOLLEN, BLOATED...
DEAD--?
TEP TEP
SKLISH
THE EXOSKELETON FELL AWAY, EXPOSING SOFT, PALE, WET FLESH INSIDE --PULSING
KRESS NEITHER KNEW NOR CARED WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THEM.
IT WAS HIS CHANCE TO GET OUT.
START, DAMN YOU!
YOU'RE MY SKIMMER! IT'S MY THUMBPRINT!
WHY WON'T YOU START?

THE ANSWER WAS IN THE DRIVE SYSTEM, ITS CABLES PROTRUDING LIKE SEVERED VEINS.
SO HE WAS STILL TRAPPED-- BUT, DAMMIT, NO LONGER HELPLESS.
NOW IT WAS THE SANDKINGS WHO WERE HELPLESS.
HIS FRENZY CARRIED HIM THROUGH TWO DOZEN OF THE THINGS BEFORE HE REALIZED
WHAT AM I DOING? TOO MANY OF THEM... AND NO NEED TO BOTHER WITH THE MOBILES!
ALL I HAVE TO DO IS GO DOWN TO THE WINE CELLAR AND GET--
-THE MAW.
OH, NO... OH, NO...
CHUNK
THE CELLAR DOOR WAS GONE, AND THE MAW'S FETID STENCH WAS A WARM WIND
INHALING
AND EXHALING
ROW AFTER ROW OF GREEDY TEETH--ALL WET AND BLOODY AND SLIMED WITH FROTHY PATCHES OF DIRTY WHITE FUNGUS ..
IT HAD BEEN WATCHING KRESS BUTCHER ITS BABIES

HE BROKE DOWN AND TOLD JALA WO EVERYTHING.
I OUGHT TO LEAVE YOU THERE, SIMON KRESS.
NO! P-PLEASE! YOU MUST HELP ME!
THIS IS YOUR OWN DOING! KEPT WELL, SANDKINGS ARE COURTLY RITUAL WARRIORS, BUT YOU'VE USED TORTURE AND STARVATION TO TURN THEM INTO MONSTERS! YOU WERE THEIR GOD!
YOU MADE THEM WHAT THEY ARE!
THAT MAW IN YOUR CELLAR IS SICK, PROBABLY INSANE, STILL SUFFERING FROM YOUR SWORD WOUND...
AND KNOW THIS, KRESS ITS MOBILES ARE NOT DEAD, BUT MERELY DORMANT
I HAVE NEVER HEARD OF SANDKINGS GROWING AS LARGE AS YOURS WHILE STILL IN THE INSECTOID STAGE--ANOTHER RESULT OF CRIPPLING THE WHITE MAW, NO DOUBT...
BUT THE METAMORPHOSIS, THE SHEDDING OF THE EXOSKELETON, IS ENTIRELY NORMAL.
AS THE MAW GROWS, YOU SEE, ITS INTELLIGENCE AND PSIONIC POWERS BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED, MORE AMBITIOUS. YOURS NOW REQUIRE BETTER SERVANTS, AND THE MOBILES WILL SOON GIVE BIRTH TO A NEW BREED OF SANDKING...
K-K-K
EACH MAW DESIGNS DIFFERENT DETAILS FOR ITS MOBILES' NEXT STAGE, TO FIT ITS NEEDS AND DESIRES, BUT THEY ARE ALWAYS BIPED WITH FOUR ARMS AND OPPOSABLE THUMBS.
THEY WILL BE ABLE TO USE TOOLS AND ADVANCED MACHINERY
THESE NEW SERVANTS WILL NOT BE SENTIENT, BUT THEIR MAW WILL BE VERY SENTIENT INDEED.
YOUR WORKERS--THE ONES WHO INSTALLED MY TANK!
AND SHADE! SHADE...IS A... MAW!


ALL THIS TALK IS WASTING TIME.
WHEN YOUR WHITE MAW AWAKENS TO FULL SENTIENCE, IT WILL BE VERY HUNGRY AND IT WILL NO LONGER NEED YOU. INDEED, IT WILL HATE YOU, AND I SUGGEST YOU LEAVE AT ONCE.
I CAN'T! THEY DESTROYED MY SKIMMER!
YOU HAVE TWO FEET. WALK! GO DUE EAST. SHADE AND I WILL LEAVE AT ONCE TO DEAL WITH THE DERANGED SANDKING YOU'VE CREATED...
K-K-K
SKLISH
"THE AREA OUT THERE IS DESOLATE. WHEN WE'RE DONE AT YOUR HOUSE, WE CAN EASILY SPOT YOU WITH AN AERIAL SEARCH--"
K-K-K
--AND IN THE MEANTIME YOU'LL BE SAFELY AWAY FROM THE SANDKINGS. NOW HURRY!
SIMON KRESS KNEW HE HAD ESCAPED JUST IN TIME...
...BUT HE COULD ONLY HOPE HE WAS FLEEING IN AN EASTERLY DIRECTION.
HOURS LATER HE WAS NEARLY MAD FROM THE HEAT, HIS EYES SEARED FROM SCANNING THE SKY'S GLARE, AGAINST WHICH A SKIMMER STILL HAD NOT APPEARED.
BUT ALREADY HE BEGAN DEVISING PLANS FOR WO AND SHADE...
IT'S ALL THEIR FAULT...AND THEY'LL SUFFER FOR IT...
LISSANDRA'S GONE...BUT I KNOW OTHERS IN HER PROFESSION...

BY TWILIGHT HE WAS CERTAIN HE'D GONE IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.
AT THE TOP OF THE LAST RISE HE WAS CAPABLE OF CLIMBING--
--HE SAW THE HOUSE... NOT AS BIG AS HIS OWN ...BUT IT WAS SHELTER AND SAFETY.
TORMENTED BY HUNGER AND THIRST, KRESS STAGGERED DOWN THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RISE TOWARD THE HOUSE AND THE CHILDREN PLAYING IN FRONT OF IT.
AND YET HE WAS ON HIS LAST LEGS, UNABLE TO CHANGE COURSE NOW.
AND WHEN HE WAS CLOSE ENOUGH TO CLEARLY SEE THEM--
NO... OH, NO...
--IT WAS TOO LATE TO ESCAPE.
THEY WERE BURNT-ORANGE, AND HE SUPPOSED THEIR CHITTERING WAS AKIN TO LAUGHTER...
...BUT THEY WERE NOT CHILDREN AT ALL.
AND NEITHER WAS THE HOUSE...
...A HOUSE.

IT WAS A CASTLE OF DESERT SAND WHOSE MAIN DOORWAY WAS BREATHING--BUT THAT WAS NOT WHAT SET SIMON KRESS TO GIBBERING.
NO, IT WAS THE OTHERS...
...THE SMALLER BURNT-ORANGE ONES WHO CAME CRAWLING FROM THE CASTLE...
...THE ONES WHO, SAVE FOR TWO EXTRA ARMS, REALLY WERE CHILDREN.
THEIR FEATURES WERE IDENTICAL, SHAPING EXPRESSIONS OF GLEEFUL CRUELTY, AND HE REMEMBERED WHAT JALA WO HAD ONCE SAID TO HIM: "LOOK TO YOUR FACES, SIMON KRESS, LOOK TO YOUR FACES."
HE DID--
NOOOOO
--AND THEY WERE NOT AT ALL CUTE.
END

Simon Kress was looking for some new pets.

Something exotic and alien, something bizarre. Anything but cute. He hated cute. In fact, Simon Kress was looking for something downright nasty.
He got just what he was looking for and exactly what he deserved...the crawling, screaming nightmare of—

SANDKINGS

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